

Iowa Department of Human Services
Four Oaks Recruitment and Retention Contract

Finding Family Connections Pilot Project FINAL REPORT NARRATIVE



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Four Oaks would like to acknowledge and thank the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) for their vision of the Finding Family Connections Pilot Project and their forward thinking in initiating such a project for Iowa's children. We feel extremely fortunate to have been a part of a project that in a time of limited available funding, scarce resources were dedicated to a non-traditional and progressive venture intended to benefit our most vulnerable citizens.

A special thanks goes out to Gary Lippe, Service Area Manager for the Dubuque Service Area for spearheading the development and implementation of the pilot, and to Krystine L. Lange, MSW, LISW, the Finding Family Connections Pilot Project contact administrator for DHS, for her vision, guidance, and leadership for DHS and project staff involved in the pilot.

In addition, Four Oaks would like to thank all staff who participated in the project. It was their daily vision, dedication, team work, and fortitude that made for a truly successful project.

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INTRODUCTION

Every child wants a loving home. Unfortunately, being in foster care can sever relationships between youth and people important to them, including family and caring adults. Many children in foster care experience multiple placements, often leaving them feeling abandoned and desperate for family connections. In the process of moving, children often lose all connection with their biological families; even with healthy, safe relatives.

Family Search & Engagement was addressed in January 2007 at the National Leadership Conference on Child Welfare Issues. Spearheaded by Catholic Community Services of Western Washington in Washington State, this model has been increasing in popularity as the most successful way to identify and connect youth with family and other significant adults. Children have a need and sense of self that they identify with their family. They gain permanence and a true belief that they belong, and when they know this, there is often an improvement in behaviors, increasing safety and stabilizing their placement¹.

In Iowa, thousands of children in foster care have limited family connections. The Department of Human Services (DHS) understood the significance of finding connections for these children for improved permanency outcomes. They partnered with Four Oaks, the recipient agency for the DHS Recruitment and Retention Contract, to develop and implement a Finding Family Connections Pilot Project. This report highlights the successes and lessons learned from the Pilot Project, which operated from February to September 2007.

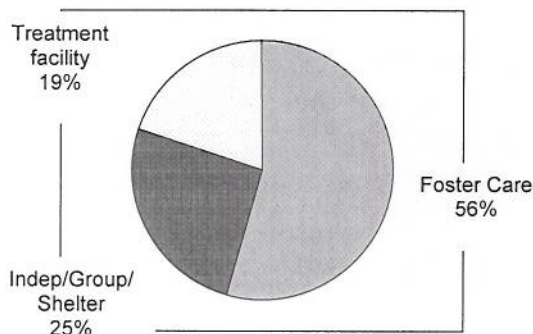
¹ *National Leadership Conference on Child Welfare Issues.* www.alliance1.org/conferences/NLCCWI2007.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

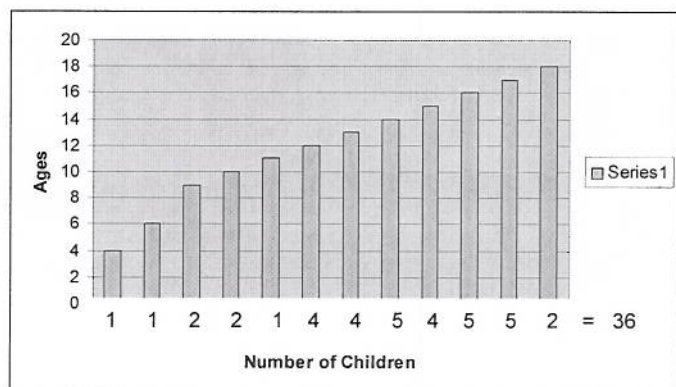
The purpose of Finding Family Connections is to locate relatives and kin who will provide a life-long connection with, and who may serve as potential placement resources for, children in foster care. The Iowa Finding Family Connections Pilot Project was spearheaded and funded by the Department of Human Services (DHS) as an amendment to the Recruitment and Retention Contract awarded to Four Oaks. This Pilot Project occurred in two (2) DHS Service Areas, Ames and Dubuque, from February until September 30, 2007.

DHS agreed to refer 30 children for the Finding Family Connections Pilot Project to project staff. Children were identified from a list of children with a permanency goal of “another planned permanent living arrangement” or children with termination of parental rights waiting for adoption. DHS staff actually identified and referred a total of thirty-six (36) children to the project; 17 in the Ames area and 19 in the Dubuque area. The vast majority (98%) of the children had parental rights terminated. Twenty (56%) of the children are currently in foster care, 9 (25%) are in an independent living facility/group home/shelter, and 7 (19%) are currently in a residential treatment facility. The gender of the children identified was evenly distributed (48% males and 42% females), and there were 5 sibling groups of 2 siblings each included in the project. The average age of the children is 13.6 years, with a mean of 12 and 15 years in the Ames and Dubuque service areas, respectively. Seven (19%) are close to or awaiting emancipation. Below please see a graphic representation of current placements and ages in the charts below:

Current Placement



Ages of Children Referred to Project



Youngest referrals were ages 4 and 6, both in the Ames service area.

Staff were identified for the project by DHS managers and supervisors, and by Iowa KidsNet Service Area Leaders. Four (4) project staff in the Ames service area and three (3) in the Dubuque service area were assigned the children referred to the project, and partnered with the DHS staff responsible for that child's permanency plan.

Once the 30 children were identified, the Finding Family Connections Pilot Project had the goal of finding new or expanded connections with relatives for ninety (90%) percent of the 30 children as demonstrated by increasing by at least one (1) the relatives they are in contact with or increasing by one (1) meaningful relationship with a relative. A 'new or expanded connection' is defined as:

- a connection with a new family member the child has never had contact with before;
- a new relationship with a family member the child has had contact with before (for example, the child met Aunt Sally years ago but never communicated with her and now she agrees to call once a week); and
- an advanced relationship with a family member the child has had contact with before (for example, Aunt Sally would call and send cards, but now she agrees to visit once a week).

The design of the project was adapted from Family Search & Engagement used by Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and included eight (8) stages:

1. Setting the Stage

This first step is when professionals and others who care about the child are identified as the child's team. Setting the stage also determines the extent and timing of the youth's initial participation, the need for family connections, and identifies the desired outcomes (find and contact family members, establish visits, permanent family resources) for the child. In addition, expectations, responsibilities, and time frames for team members are determined.

2. Search & Discovery

This step includes having conversations with the child and others, as appropriate, in order to begin making initial contacts and exploring records to complete a family tree. The goal of discovery is to identify as many resources as possible for the child. It is expected that discovery will reveal as many as 40 resources for a child.

3. Review & Planning

The discovery of information is reviewed by key players. ‘Found’ family is discussed and extent of participation and connections are approved by the team. Background checks are completed with department assistance, and safety considerations are discussed and strategies developed.

4. Engagement

This stage evaluates and determines whether newly found family members will add strengths and resources to the process. If they are approved, the team determines how to support the connections with the child. The team also determines the most appropriate contribution by the child to the planning process.

5. Preparation for Initial Meetings between Youth & Family

The stage assures the safe and productive initial contact between youth and family. The roles and expectations, as well as the parameters of initial meetings, are discussed. Professionals are prepared for expectations of the meeting, and foster parents or residential staff are prepared for behaviors pre- and post-visit. These initial visits are brief, supportive, and occur in natural settings. After the visit occurs, there is discussion of the visit (debriefing) and future planning.

6. Family Ties: Transition Planning to the Family

After the initial meeting, the resources of the connected family as well as the family’s ability to commit to a long term relationship with the child are discussed. In conjunction with the family, placement options and connections are reviewed, and visitation planning, legal issues, and other decisions regarding the child also occur.

7. Staying Together

With the support from the Team, the family can explore reunification, adoption, guardianship, kinship foster care, and other possibilities. Formal and informal supports are put in place, including contingency plans, to support the child.

8. Documentation & Case Closure

This stage is consistently utilized throughout the process, and can inform the clinical process, inspire others, and validate effectiveness of the search and engagement process for the child. Family resources contacted and engaged during the intervention, as well as

the child's team member and others that participated in the process are documented. Outcomes are written and other data needed by the process is recorded.

On average, staff spent 3-5 hours mining a child's file and made an average of 3-5 contacts per child. The length of time spent on each child in the project was dependent on the information gleaned from the file, direction from DHS staff, and outcomes of the initial contacts. For some children, the process of finding connections extended a few months, and others only a few weeks. All children in the project (100%) were transition to DHS staff by September 30, 2007.

The next section of this report highlights the case data and outcomes achieved by the Pilot Project.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

“The Finding Family Connections project was the most rewarding experience in my 30 years as a social worker” – Veronica Paridiso, project staff.

“This project should be done for every child that enters the system. It will make a huge difference for their future” – Carol Lippe, project staff.

During the eight (8) months of the Finding Family Connections Pilot Project, DHS and project staff embarked on an incredible journey with the children who participated in the project. While DHS referred 36 children for the Finding Family Connections Pilot Project, five (5) of those referrals could not be completed. For two (2) of these children, DHS and the child’s therapist recommended a search termination due to therapeutic issues, and for three (3) DHS requested no contact on either side of the family. Thirty-one (31) children completed the project.

Out of the 31 children, thirteen (13) identified children completed the project in the Ames service area. Out of the 13 children, 12 had a new connection as a result of this project. In Dubuque, eighteen (18) children completed the project, and 17 of those had a new connection as a result of this project. These results are significant, especially for the child, and demonstrate a **97% success rate in finding new connections for this project.**

Project Outcomes Summary

<u>Pilot Project Service Area</u>	<u># of DHS Identified</u>	<u># of Project Eligible</u>	<u># of New Connections</u>	<u>Outcome Percentage</u>
Ames	17	13	12	92%
Dubuque	19	18	17	95%
ACTUAL TOTAL	36	31	29	94%
PROJECT TOTAL		30	29	97%
<i>Project Goal</i>		30	27	90%

On the following page is a list of children that participated in the project and their connections.

As reported, almost one-third (1/3) of all found family connections advanced to a phone call or visit with the child. For another quarter (¼) of children, a phone call or visit was recommended as a next step in the child's transition plan to the DHS worker. Family team meetings occurred for a small percentage of children during the pilot project, with about half (½) of those including Finding Family Connections project staff.

After project completion, a few staff were interviewed to determine their personal experience with the project. Project staff believed that the best part of the project was inherent: finding connections for children that have limited family involvement, especially if they were soon to age out of care, was extremely rewarding and will have a life-long positive effect for the children. Only one DHS staff was available for comment, however, this worker and project staff agreed that working together, communicating often, and dedication to finding a connection by both parties was integral to the project's success. Areas for project improvement were quite varied and appear to be based on personal experiences with the project itself. DHS staff felt that a longer preparation phase for new connections and the child prior to the Initial Meeting phase would have been helpful. This worker also suggested for DHS to identify guidelines for managing the outcomes (both positive and negative) for the new family connection and the child. The majority of project staff expressed that more defined criteria for project referrals would have been extremely helpful. A few thought that reporting forms and other project documentation needs should have been determined prior to the start of the project; a few would have liked closer geographic assignment of a DHS and project staff team; and a few would have found closer clinical and general supervision an asset.

While there were other comments and suggestions that would have made for a more finely-tuned pilot project, staff were extremely positive and pleased with the outcomes and found participation a very rewarding experience. Not only is Finding Family Connections "feel-good", it gets results and has a significant impact that inspires positive outcomes for children in foster care.

In the following section, summarized case studies highlight a few of the children referred to the project and their journey in finding new connections.

CASE STUDIES

“JOHN”

“John” is a 14 year old boy who was removed from his mother’s home in October 2005. Since that time, he has been in and out of foster care and in August of 2006 was placed in residential treatment due to behavioral issues. John had no contacts with any family members. His biological father’s name had been misspelled and he could not be located. Project staff Veronica “Ronnie” Paradiso was assigned John’s case. Ronnie spent an extended amount of time attempting to find relatives for John. She was particularly determined to find John’s father, and did multiple searches spelling his name in many different ways. Finally, she found a man whose name was almost right, and he was the same presumed age as John’s father. He resided in Wisconsin. Ronnie spoke with her DHS worker, Nicole Uthoff, about the lead. Nicole approved making contact with this man. Ronnie took a chance and called him, and it was John’s father. He had been hoping to find his son someday, but had no idea where to look. Later that day, Ronnie talked with John about finding his father. He was very excited. A few days later, John, Ronnie and Nicole made the call to John’s father. It was a success. He found out that his father had remarried, and he had half-brothers and sisters! John immediately went from ‘alone’ to part of a large family. Since then, John has been receiving regular letters from his father and his half-brothers and sisters. The plan is for John to have extended phone contact with his new family so they can be reunited when his treatment is complete.

“SUE”

“Sue” is a 10 year old girl who was removed from her home in October 2004 due to parental drug abuse. Sue was in foster care until early 2007 when she began demonstrating sexualized behaviors. Since this time she has been in a PMIC facility in Cedar Rapids. Project staff, Kelli Noveshen, located Sue’s maternal aunt. She and her DHS worker, Joni Duffy, agreed it would be appropriate to send her an e-mail. Kelli found that the aunt was initially very excited to write to Sue. However, this aunt has not responded to further contact from Kelli, and Joni confirmed that Sue’s family has a history of not following through with connections. While Kelli explored other family possibilities for Sue, Joni facilitated a connection between Sue and a family who is caring for her brother, “Steve”, and adopted her older brother, “Shane”. This connection has strengthened Sue’s relationship with her brothers, and initiated a connection with Sue and this

family. The plan is to continue contact with her brothers in their adoptive/foster family home, and eventually place Sue in that home (if the family is willing).

“SARAH”

“Sarah” is a 16 year old girl who was removed from her mother’s care in early 2004. She was placed at a shelter until a foster family was found a few months later. Sarah was in and out of foster homes and shelters due to behavioral problems, and in early 2006 was moved to Toledo Juvenile Home. Project staff Victoria (Ronnie) Paradiso met with Sarah. Sarah already had a good relationship with her mother and speaks with her every week. Sarah said she does not have contact with her mother’s family because her mother is the ‘black sheep’ of the family and has isolated herself from them. Ronnie asked about her father, and Sarah said her mother told her that her father was a member of a gang, did drugs, and left before Sarah was born. She also said that he was in a coma in a nursing home. Ronnie asked her to fill out a genogram. Based on this, Sarah said she would like to have contact with her aunt that lives by a lake in Albany. Ronnie and the DHS worker, Nicole Uthoff, had contact at least three times a week and after every connection to determine if they were appropriate connections and how to proceed. Ronnie found where the father was residing contacted the nursing home. Sarah’s father was not in a coma, but it was apparent that his cognitive abilities were limited. His sister, Sarah’s aunt who is her father’s conservator, informed Ronnie that he had a grand-mal seizure is in a locked ward because he wanders off and has short-term memory loss. Her aunt agreed to be on Sarah’s call list and there is frequent contact between them to share information between father and daughter. In addition, Ronnie contacted Sarah’s aunt in Albany. A phone contact was scheduled, but before it, the aunt contacted Ronnie. She was nervous because she did not know what to say. Ronnie assured her that Sarah was very excited to talk with her. The aunt contacted Ronnie after the call to say that it went very well and there will be continued contact between them. Sarah is very excited to have ongoing contact with both of her aunts and looks forward to actually speaking with and visiting her father someday.

LESSONS LEARNED

As was stated previously, the staff and children involved with the pilot project embarked on an incredible journey of search and discovery. It should be noted that every project has lessons learned and these are crucial in redesigning, improving, and strengthening our services. As was evident from the staff responses to the project, it was a positive and successful pilot. These lessons are our “20/20 hindsight” comments regarding the Finding Family Connections Pilot Project.

Lesson 1:

The first lesson learned is that a Finding Family Connections Project, even with minimal financial resources, can have a significant impact on the life of a child and can significantly improve permanency outcomes. Many staff now refer to this project as a “no brainer”. While improving outcomes for children was the intent of the project, it was the actual extent of these outcomes, as well as the positive effects on the child, that really seemed to inspire this as a lesson learned for staff involved in the project.

Lesson 2:

The second lesson learned was the amount of time, energy, and dedication necessary to find connections for many of these children. It was clearly evident that staff would require a very low case load or be solely dedicated to the project in order to optimize outcomes for each child. In fact, the most successful outcomes for this project were seen by the single full-time, 100% dedicated project staff.

Lesson 3:

The third lesson learned was that the current system is not prepared to appropriately refer children to the project; adjust case loads to meet the level of time, energy, dedication, and sense of urgency necessary to effectively incorporate search & engagement; understand the optimal time to refer a child to the project; follow up on found connections; and address issues that these new connections surface within the project.

Finding Family Connections does not just slide easily and readily into existing practice. There is a myth that we shouldn't do anything to "disrupt a stabilized placement". However, finding a family connection should never disrupt and there are many instances that demonstrate a more stabilized placement after a connection is made. In order for this project to be ongoing and successful, some existing processes, systems, and current ways of thinking must be modified. For example, policies surrounding sealed adoption files, intake procedures, and internal and external communications should be re-examined. Current practices of utilizing residential facilities, shelters, and foster care before 'discovery' occurs must be evaluated. In addition, changing the culture of child welfare to more easily put biases and assumptions aside ("unpacking the NO") in order to find new family connections will be necessary for the ongoing success of the project. When biases and assumptions were removed in this project, the results were swift and positive.

Lesson 4:

The fourth lesson learned was that training needs to occur *before* model implementation, including the referral. The training should include specific and defined criteria for child referrals to the project. There should be no confusion between 'connection' and 'placement'. Clear explanation of the project for both DHS and project staff, in conjunction with specific criteria and guidelines for child referrals, would have had an impact the children referred to the project and the connections made for them.

Lesson 5:

The fifth and final lesson learned surrounded staffing of the project. Project staff most successful were those confident in their ability to find connections for a child and those who maintained a "sense of urgency" in establishing a connection for that child. Stronger daily supervision would have been beneficial to provide on-going support and direction for some staff. More thoughtful planning in assigning staff to children that included consideration of geographic location should be included in future project design. More direction and guidelines were necessary in establishing direction for staff when they hit a 'dead-end' on a connection, whether this happened from the onset or during the course of "discovery". Without direction and a decision-tree model, many staff were unclear which direction to continue and as a result, some children remain with limited or very few family in their lives. Supervision of project staff needs to begin

with supervisors that are trained in search and engagement practices. They should ensure that search and engagement is a priority for staff and there is access to all search engines, even those that charge a fee. Supervisors should have clear expectations of staff and their role in the search and engagement process. Regular clinical supervision- at least twice monthly- should occur to review appropriateness of new referrals, and with new referrals, review the child's team members; confirm case goals and status of those goals; assist staff in maintaining a sense of urgency for each child; and guide staff through dead-ends and other barriers to finding connections. Finally, supervisors should review all case transition plans, if this occurs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Four Oaks is pleased with the results of the Finding Family Connections Pilot Project, and recommend the continuation and expansion of this project because of the significant (and cost-effective) impact it has on the life of a child. We do, based on lessons learned, have some recommendations for DHS when this project is implemented throughout the state of Iowa.

1. Challenge Existing Practice

As stated previously in this report, a new project that successfully deviates from current practices, biases, and assumptions often gets stifled by current and existing practices. It is important to explore all avenues of the foster care system to determine if the outcomes from Finding Family Connections can be managed, supported, and realized to their fullest potential. Identifying and evaluating existing systems for replication is essential. One excellent example of a thriving project is occurring in Santa Clara County, Washington. The Juvenile Court System in Santa Clara County is committed to finding permanency for their children, and in developing their finding families system, have identified some interesting obstacles to success:

- Typical social work practice stops family finding at the immediate biological family.
- Judges/attorneys/GALs don't ask about viable relatives, fictive kin, or other potential connections for the child.
- We assume the family of a parent in prison can't be a resource for the child or provide information about other family members.
- Family members with 'Challenging Behaviors' discourage us.
- Non-family placements are easier.
- We believe that teens need to be 'independent' from family and not engage.

Santa Clara overcame these obstacles by utilizing family finding, wrap around services, team decision making, and a joint response to maximize permanency outcomes for children. With finding families, they encourage a new attitude, "social services on steroids", and new technology regarding finding families. In addition, Santa Clara has created a unit within their department that deals exclusively with finding relatives, called the Relative Finding Assessment Unit. This unit has experienced a *doubling of relative placements for children in the 2 years since they were initiated*. This project reaches all areas of the system and includes the role of the courts. The Juvenile Court in Santa Clara County has three goals: 1) keep children safe, 2) give

parents a fair chance to reunify with children who have been removed, and 3) ensure timely permanency for children under juvenile court jurisdiction. They define permanency as returning to a parent, adoption, guardianship, and placement with a relative. Interestingly, foster care or group home is not in their definition. By defining permanency and the role of the court in permanency for children, a system that ‘wraps’ the child can be achieved².

2. Project Scope

It is strongly recommended that Finding Family Connections be integrated into practice. This could mean that all staff assimilate the practice on some level to find family connections for a child, or staff refer children to other staff (DHS or private agency) that are solely dedicated to the project. Regardless, the submersion of search and engagement activities into overall case management and permanency outcomes for a child should be a best practice. In addition, other systems that would potentially play a large role in “wrapping” services around a child, such as Juvenile Court and residential treatment facilities, must ‘buy in’ to finding families and adopt similar goals and permanency definitions as the Department.

3. Training

Staff must understand and support the purpose and goals of the project. They must explore their own biases and assumptions, and commit to putting them aside for the benefit of the child. Staff must evaluate the appropriateness of child referrals and prioritize them, utilize the search and engagement stages, understand how to effectively prepare the child for and engage the child in the process, and proceed as defined by the child’s permanency plan. Training should also occur system wide and include all agencies that provide wrap around services for the child.

4. Criteria and Guidelines

As discussed throughout this report, criteria and guidelines are necessary for many areas of Finding Family Connections. Establishing definitions to define goals for the safety and permanency of children that incorporate finding family principles and ensuring the consistency of these between wrap around partners is integral. Some recommended criteria and guidelines for the project, as well as some suggestions for shaping these criteria and guidelines are as follows:

² Forth National Youth Permanency Convening. Power Point Presentation. April 28, 2005. San Francisco, CA.

❖ Intake

- At the point of initial referral, gather as much family information from each family member contacted as part of the family's investigation.
- As the life of a case continues, there may be less opportunity to acquire names, addresses, and phone numbers of extended relatives.

❖ Child Referrals

- This should be added as the first step to the Family Search & Engagement process to precede *Setting the Stage*. Referring appropriate children to the project comes before initiating all of the other stages for a child.
- Specific and defined criteria for referrals are necessary. Children should be referred to the project as soon as they come into the system- the intent is to prevent emancipation without connections. Children with parental rights terminated (TPR) and who have minimal contact with other relatives should be a priority for referrals. Staff must consider new or expanded connections even when the child is in the process of being adopted by a non-relative, especially if racial or cultural factors are present.
- Once a child is identified, a standardized, comprehensive form must accompany the referral. A referral form should include:
 - Child information
 - Listing of current connections and known family network
 - Siblings and locations of them
 - Placements and therapeutic contacts
 - Current and recent behaviors
 - Goals for the connections- finding new connections, strengthening known connections, and placement/permanency plans

❖ General Project Guidelines

- Definition and expectation of outcomes and case transitioning
- Include a Confidentiality Policy and Guidelines for Release of Information
- Roles and performance expectations of DHS and contracted agency (if applicable) project personnel (which includes adequate and appropriate supervision)

❖ 'Dead-Leads' and establishing 'Cold Calls'

- Embrace the unknown and non-traditional

- Be creative
- Retain the sense of urgency for each child
- How to create sense of roots and belonging if connections don't occur
- ❖ Prioritize Found Family Engagements
 - Decision making with child's team
 - Clinical judgment that includes safety, location, and appropriateness
- ❖ Preparing Fragile Children for the Project
 - Inclusion and support of child's mental health professional
 - Decision making with child's team
- ❖ Continuing the Connection
 - Strategies to progress and advance the relationship
 - When to modify the child's permanency plan

5. Do It Anyway

It is understood that an existing system cannot change overnight. However, while avenues for change are explored, a Finding Family Connections Project must continue as the benefits to the child in the current system far outweigh the frustrations of staff and agencies who will work within the system to find connections for children.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In February 2007, Four Oaks and the Department of Human Services (DHS) did not realize the significance of the pilot project they were about to undertake. Although there were many bumps and bruises (and some confusion) along the way, the results of the project were noteworthy. Project staff were referred 30 children in two service areas and set out to find connections for them. Out of this 30, project staff found new connections, reconnected children with family, or strengthened an existing connection for **97%** of the children.

There were lessons learned and based on those lessons, recommendations for an idealistic implementation of an ongoing project. It is a reality, however, that the system cannot change quickly so that finding families fits beautifully into it. What has been demonstrated by the pilot is success in the most challenging of circumstances. Despite these challenges, project and DHS staff achieved results beyond expectations in a project that operated for only eight (8) months. This in itself is a clear indication that Finding Family Connections works for children and should be incorporated into the goals and permanency plans for each child.

We must not let the status of the current system deter the continuation of Finding Family Connections. A balance between existing practice and the integration of this project must be reached so that it can be successful. The belief and value that every child must have a permanent family relationship is paramount to this work. Despite any shortcomings, this belief will drive the practice and fuel the urgency to establish, maintain, and support connections for children in the State of Iowa. The ball is in our court- we need to step up and take the shot, and then refine our game (the system) as our skills and understanding of it improve. Let's go for it!